W H S WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS W H S

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"Gordon Hall," home of the Judge Dexter family, named for Kitty Gordon, mother of the second Mrs. Dexter, holds many happy memories for me, and my weekly visits to Grandma Dexter were always bright spots,- first because it was such fun to climb the stile leading to the path up through the long row of maple trees, and also the house itself, with its huge pillars in front, its beautiful wide hall the full width of the house, and the broad stairway, all the soft carpets and lovely furniture were a real thrill, and never a word of warning from Grandma Dexter,- we could romp and play all over the house.

Mrs. Dexter spent several winters in New Orleans, and while there conceived the plan of bringing a small colored girl home with her, who by living in the home could be trained to be the ideal servant. This little colored girl was made one of the family, and many a romp and play have I had with her. However, the little girl became spoiled and not at all the ideal that Mrs. Dexter had planned on and she was finally sent back home to New Orleans.

One of the stories told by Mrs. Dexter was about Judge Dexter and his experiences as the first Postmaster in Dexter. One day while in Ann Arbor he was detained, and as Mrs. Dexter was along with him he made arrangements for her to bring the mail. He packed the saddle bags and saw her safely on her horse and started for the 10-mile ride to Dexter. It was raining hard, and when darkness came and still several miles from home, her horse reared and she saw two gleaming eyes at the roadside. She recognized a panther, and dug her spurs into her horse's side. It was then a race between horse and panther, but when they reached the outskirts of town the panther gave up and re-entered the forest.

Another happy memory is the good times we as children had in the Evarts Grist Mill and Flour Mill (now the Ford Mill), riding down the inclined railway toward the hopper and grinder -- things that our parents never knew about. However, we really did see that a big beam was placed on the track before we reached the hopper!

We remember the day Mrs. Dennis Warner was killed at the railroad crossing and the subsequent petition for a grade crossing,- which was done, and the present viaduct over the New York Central tracks was the result. It was built by a young colored engineer who made a separate pattern for every stone in the arch, so it was claimed that it could never collapse. At that time it was the only one of its kind in the United States.

The seasons much have changed, for I remember so well that for years we always planned on skating for Thanksgiving. By the middle of winter the races on the ice were enjoyed by the entire populace. Some of those taking part were: J. V. N. Gregory, Alf Phelps, Henry Phelps, and Marc Cook. They would start up-stream at Bates's Woods, coming down the mile stretch to the bridge. After a few years, when the ice no longer got as thick as formerly, the races had to be abandoned. One Thanksgiving, Pearl Walker fell through the ice while skating and was rescued by Jay Page and Myrta Phelps. The townspeople gave Jay a gold watch and Myrta $25 to replace her ruined coat. Myrta wore the old coat and bought a bicycle instead!

The colored barber, Ben Rope, and his wife, Mary, were always interesting and popular, and when Ben died a dozen or so of us children went to view the remains as we had been told that colored people turned white when they died. Of course we had to see, and of course we were disappointed - Ben was still black. After his death the barbering was taken over by his wife Mary, who became a very successful lady barber and the town was very proud of her.

Our first recollection of stores were the Alley store and the Costello store. Costello dealt in groceries and dry goods, with funeral parlors at the back, and the office of R. P. Copeland in one of the front windows where he bought and sold wheat and all kinds of grains. The Alley store was a genuine old-fashioned store with open barrels of crackers and pickles, and the cheese with a knife beside it for the lunches of customers. Fred Alley, one of the owners, took naps on the dry goods counter, with a bolt of calico for a pillow. Many times Fred had to tell us why he smoked: as soon as he stopped his corns hurt and when he started again his corns would be all right - and he really believed it.

Then there was Sadie Walker's candy store, a regular meeting place for all the school children, where a penny really bought some candy.

One favorite story of my mother's was of her grandfather, Ezra Jones, who sent his two sons to Plymouth with a load of wheat. This they sold for more than they expected so, so they decided to buy their little sister a present. They paid $1.00 for a pair of ear-rings, and these ear-rings have been worn constantly for almost 200 years, handed down each generation. Right now they are being worn by my grand-daughter, Frances Mackey, who pierced her own ears so she could wear her great-great-great-great-grandmother's ear-rings.

Another of my mother's stories related that in planning the village of Dexter, the Judge laid down a flat-iron, with the base along Mill Creek and the point up by the German church on Ann Arbor Street. In looking at the map it really would seem that he planned the streets that way, as Ann Arbor Street is the main street and all the other streets join it at an angle. Judge Dexter also planned that the sun would shine in every room in every house at some time through the day, and in the older homes this is really so. This house where we are now faces the northeast, and we always have sun-shine in some room. None of the older houses in town are laid out strictly north-south and east-west, but are all turned a little on an angle.

The Fourth of July celebrations were always big events. Among the attractions were various races, of which we youngsters enjoyed the tub races by far the most. The boys riding the tubs used their hands for paddles and came down Mill Creek if they could. Few could make it all the way, and the tip-overs called for loud cheers. One Fourth of July the town's young men decided to take an old brass cannon from the town park and load it heavily with gun-powder, and really wake up the town at 4 a.m. This they did, but with disastrous results. The cannon was so heavily loaded that when touched off it

boomed down the bank into the creek and deep down into the mud, where it still remains, so they say, well hidden in the bottom of the mill pond.

Dexter is an interesting town, full of memories and tall tales of its past. A favorite pasttime of us oldsters is getting together and reminiscing. My mother could go on and on telling tales for a day at a time, and many students from the University came to visit with her, especially when they had a "thesis" to write.

Dexter, Michigan
September 20, 1953

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DEVELOPMENT OF DEXTER VILLAGE
By John H. Morrison

Dexter Village, Washtenaw County, Michigan, is located at the junction of Mill Creek and the Huron River. In pre-pioneer times this locality was connected with Detroit by Indian trails. Trails also extended to the north by way of Portage Lake and to the northwest toward the Grand River. The Indians of this vicinity fought on the side of Great Britain in the War of 1812, and years later these war veterans walked through the main street of Dexter on their way to Canada to receive the money for their services.

In 1820, Congress passed an act to sell the land for $1.25 an acre. Samuel W. Dexter, a wealthy man from Boston, Massachusetts, bought nearly 4000 acres of this land at different times. His first purchase, in 1824, was signed by James Monroe, President.

A mill and dam was constructed on Mill Creek by S. W. Dexter in 1825, and a large house was erected on the south bank of the Huron in 1826. Two Indian trails were made into highways, one connecting the village with Ann Arbor, the other connecting it with Detroit.

The settlement was first known as Mill Creek Settlement. Yankee merchants like Cowden and Nelson H. Wing settled in the village in the late 1820's. In 1820, it was platted and named Dexter. Within the next 10 years the following settlers came in: George C. Page, an Englishman, the first tailor; a man named Field, first shoemaker; A. D. Crane, first blacksmith (Crane afterward read and practiced law); Dennis Warner, merchant; and Henry Vinkle, first cabinet-maker and undertaker. Dexter Village was located in two townships, Scio and Webster. It was the third largest town in Washtenaw County, Ann Arbor being first and Ypsilanti second, all three on the Huron River. The Methodist, Baptist, Congregational, and Episcopal churches were organized in the village at this time. St. Joseph's Catholic Church was not built until 1853.

Railroad

In 1841, Dexter, along with Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, was linked with Detroit by the strap-rail railroad. It was first called the Detroit and St. Joseph Railroad; later changed to the Michigan Central. For four decades this railroad was an asset to Dexter; later on it became a liability.

In the early part of the 1840's, Judge Dexter built a mansion in Webster Township, and called it "Gordon Hall." It is on a rise of ground overlooking the village of Dexter and the Michigan Central Railroad. Here he lived with his family and his books and his several "retainers," like his feudal ancestors in Ireland. He was the first judge of Washtenaw County, and once a regent of the University of Michigan. He ran for Congress on the Free Soil ticket, but was defeated.

The village of Dexter was incorporated by the Legislature in 1855. It waxed prosperous through the 1860's and 1870's, through its water power and flour mills. Then came the Civil War. Many men of influence in Dexter were in sympathy with the South; they were called "Copper-heads." A. D. Crane became a Colonel in the Union Army.

Seven miles west of Dexter a new village had been founded on the Michigan Central by the Condon brothers, in 1850. It was called Chelsea, after Chelsea, Massachusetts. By 1850, it had passed Dexter in population and business, becoming the third largest town in the county. Dexter's milling business was declining.

In 1884, it looked as if Dexter would get another start by the building of another railroad from Ann Arbor to Howell. However, the Michigan Central put an end to this dream, by influencing the promoters of this railroad to go to Howell by way of Whitmore Lake. This T. A. A. & N. M. (Toledo, Ann Arbor, and Northern Michigan) went 3 miles out of its way between Ann Arbor and Whitmore Lake so as to serve the neighborhood of the Leeland and Sutton families, who were leaders in Northfield Township. In less than ten years, however, the new railroad straightened its tracks north of Ann Arbor and left these farmers 3 miles off the railroad.

Dexter was still on its decline when the decade of the 1890's came, only one of its flour mills then operating, the one on Mill Creek,- all the others either closed or burned. Not only Chelsea had passed Dexter in business and prestige, but also Manchester, Saline, and Milan.

Electricity

Nearly ten years after Ann Arbor, Chelsea, and Ypsilanti got electricity, in the late 1890's, Dexter got its first electric power through Thomas Birkett. He installed a makeshift plant in his Mill Creek mill. This plant operated until 1904, when it was replaced by a village-owned electric plant. Thomas Birkett, with some Lansing capitalists, promoted an electric interurban railroad from Ann Arbor to Lansing by way of Dexter. This was incorporated as the Lansing, Dexter, and Ann Arbor Railroad. The Michigan Central again prevented its establishment, as it had in 1884. And in 1902 a new interurban was started 3 miles south of Dexter, following the Jackson Road from Ann Arbor to Jackson.

In 1900, still another interurban was started out of Jackson toward Ann Arbor, built by William A. Boland of Grass Lake. Boland built his railroad as far as Dexter by 1902, and in 1903 started grading toward Ann Arbor. But at this point his credit was curtailed in New York banks. Boland's interurban was purchased afterward by the D. J. & C., and the new owner removed the ties and rails of the Boland line from Dexter to Grass Lake.

Telephone

In 1902, the Bell Telephone Company, which had had switchboard and offices at Dexter since the 1880's, began installing farm telephones. Around the other towns in the county (Chelsea, Manchester, and Milan) the farms were connected with a local switchboard, but at Dexter switchboards were set up in two farm houses; one was the Webster exchange, the other the Scio exchange. This left Dexter Village with only a few subscribers. However, in 1904, a new telephone company located at Dexter, the Washtenaw Home Telephone Co. Its lines were extended into Scio, Webster, and Dexter townships, and the two farmhouse exchanges were put out of business.

In the winter of 1903-1904, the Detroit Edison Company sent engineers out to survey the Huron Valley from Base Lake to the Wayne County line. Early in 1905, agents from the Commonwealth Power Co., of Jackson, began buying dams and flowage lands in the vicinity of Dexter. It looked for a time as if Commonwealth would supply Dexter with all electric power, as it does Chelsea. However, the Company a gents shortsightedly failed to buy flowage lands on the James Morrison farm above Scio dam, and in 1908 they were sold by Morrison to the Detroit Edison Company. By 1909, the Detroit Edison had acquired all the commonwealth lands on the Huron. In 1913, Detroit Edison extended its power lines from Ann Arbor to Dexter.

Roads

In this year Washtenaw County adopted the county highway system. Many farmers were opposed to this system, thinking it was a plan to build only one good road between Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, and Chelsea. The Scio supervisor, Jacob Jedele, pulled strings at Ann Arbor and got a Dexter man on the Board of Road Commissioners, named Sam Schultz. This Board of three commissioners mapped out the route to be improved from Ann Arbor to Chelsea by way of Dexter. Then the State Highway Commissioner, Frank Rodgers, was up in arms against such a route; he wanted them to improve the Jackson Road. Supervisor Jedele died in 1917, but he had already secured for Dexter connection with Ann Arbor by a county trunk-line highway. In this he had help from Henry Douglass of the Gas Co., and R. W. Hemphill of Detroit Edison.

Even so, Dexter continued to lose population, and in the census of 1920 the village and Scio Township reached an all-time low. Such was the state of affairs when, in 1920, through the influence of Harvey R. Blanchard, Henry Ford purchased the mill and dam on Mill Creek. Dexter's renaissance started with this real estate deal between Ford and Mrs. H. Wirt Newkirk, daughter of Thomas Birkett. The Ford ownership had a psychological influence, and people began moving to Dexter to live instead of moving away.

By this time all the villages in the county had their main streets paved except Dexter. The Michigan Central, through Frank Rodgers, was the cause. Why was this railroad always opposing improvements for Dexter? One answer is that the Michigan Central meant to build, in the future, four tracks between Detroit and Jackson.

Two of these were to pass less than a half mile south of Dexter, crossing the Ann Arbor-Dexter highway. If another railroad or an improved highway were at this place, the Michigan Central would have the expense of grade separation. In 1927, it started its expansion plan by locating its Huron Gravel Company on the Fred Burch farm outside Dexter. It was going to take several years to remove and sell the gravel, and when the big cut was finished on the Burch farm, the line would be extended through Dan Hoey's farm toward the Baker road. But the gravel company got into trouble with some land owners down the river, became involved in a law-suit, and finally ceased operating. Thus were the plans of the Michigan Central upset. The four-lane railroad will never now be built.

Dexter's Main and Ann Arbor Streets were finally paved in 1929. The Ann Arbor-Dexter county road was taken over by the state in the late 1920's, brought about by Frank E. Robison, chief attorney for the Michigan Central and a friend of Frank Rodgers. On the same day, Oct. 31, 1929, the D. J. & C. Interurban, south of Dexter, was sold at Ann Arbor for junk, leaving the Michigan Central the only highway of steel between Ann Arbor and Jackson.

Schools

Dexter got a new addition to its schoolhouse under PWA, and 7 miles of sewers dug by WPA, in the 1930's. This was brought about by U. S. Senator Royal S. Copeland, from New York, a native of Dexter. A parochial school had been established in Dexter in the 1920's by St. Joseph's Catholic Church.

Industries

The Michigan Molded Plastics Company located at Dexter in 1940. A celebration of the 100th year of the Michigan Central was held in Dexter in 1941. Huron River Drive is a new highway in the Huron River Valley between Ann Arbor and Dexter, built in 1920 through the efforts of William W. Blakeley of Dexter, and Edward Wagner, Scio Supervisor. Detroit Edison sold all its flowage lands along the Huron, in 1940, to Henry Ford. In the late 1940's, the Ford Motor Company sold a factory site at Scio, 3 miles down the river, to the King-Seeley Corporation. This is the largest industrial plant in Washtenaw County west of Ann Arbor.

Dexter citizens of the 19th century and the early 1900's were composed of four groups: first, the Yankees whose parents or grandparents came from New York or New England. Then the English, Irish, and Germans. There were only two negro families; and lastly a few French, Scotch, and Danes. The Yankees alone were "Americans;" all others were regarded as foreigners and outsiders, to the third generation, even by the people themselves. It took the Army Draft in 1917 to teach the Yankees and the foreigners both that they are all of the same nation.

HALLOWE'EN OF FIFTY YEARS AGO IN ANN ARBOR

by Detective George Simmons,
Ann Arbor Police Department

To most of us, Hallowe'en brings many memories, some pleasant and some not so pleasant, like when we were caught red-handed sticking a toothpick in Mr. Crabby's door-bell, or got doused with a bucket of cold water which Mrs. Grumpy threw at us when we used the tick-tack on her windows. As I am not personally qualified to talk about what happened 50 years ago, I have to depend on memories of older people or on records. Police records around 1903 were so incomplete that they were not of much help. So I consulted the microfilm library of the Ann Arbor News files. The more I delved into those columns of the past, the more I felt that the youth of today are not so very different from the youth of 50 years ago. The basic drives have not changed. In one item, a staid old business man of that day said, "Hallowe'en of today is not what it used to be when I was a boy. Things happened in those days; why, we were out all night doing whatever deviltry we could find to do. The older people were different when I was a boy. They were not as narrow minded as these modern folks are. If a man looked out his window in the morning and saw his hen coop resting on his neighbor's barn roof, he would just go out and get it down as best be could and not be angry. The old folks just put everything that was movable inside and girded themselves for the things that he knew were going to happen. He knew that he would probably find part of his fence set up in front of Fatty Kupple's house so that it would look like Fatty had taken it. Yes, nothing was safe in the good old days when I was a boy." This was printed in the News in the early 1900's. Does it not have a familiar ring? It seems that each crop of fathers comes up with that old expression, "Now, back in the good old days when I was young..." I even find myself telling the young folks of today about the things they missed by being born 40 years too late. No, I do not feel that people have changed much in their basic thinking. To bear this out, I have here a copy of the Michigan Argus printed in 1873. The front-page editorial tells quite a story about the problems of parents back in those good old days. "We are becoming a nation of schemers, to live without manual labor. Our young men are not learning trades or preparing to be good farmers, but are seeking after clerkships, postoffices, fat offices, and crowding the cities where it is supposed a living is easily earned. Our girls are not learning to cook, sew, or be good housekeepers, but want to dress to kill, and live like ladies without work. In fact a majority of them will not do housework for wages, no matter how great their need. We are like the man who hires his neighbor boy to do his work while his own boy lounges in saloons and billiard halls on expense accounts. His daughters dress up and entertain beaux at ten to twelve, instead of being put to the affairs of the household in the place of Biddy or Dinah who have been employed to do it. We must turn out more artisans and food growers. We must turn over a new leaf. Our boys and girls must learn to love labor and be qualified for it. We must teach our young ladies to look well to the ways of the household." That was written 80 years ago; just how much different are our problems with the youth of today?

What did the youth of 50 years ago do on Hallowe'en? Some of the following news items culled from the News files will tell you: "The Baptist Young People's Guild held a party at their Guild House. They were entertained by ghosts. They had their fortunes told, and they ate apples on the roof by the light of the moon."
"Miss Cornelia Nichols of Geddes Avenue, entertained a group of her friends in a most original way. Her barn was decorated up in cornstalks, autumn leaves, and Jack-o-lanterns. The guests were greeted by two ghosts inside the barn and after an old-fashioned spelling bee, the ghosts led the group out to a huge bonfire where they had a marshmallow roast and a war dance. Later they returned to the barn where they danced the Virginia Reel, Money Musk, Hoe Down, and The Wild Irishman. Refreshments included apples, grapes, pears and nuts!"
"There was a Hallowe'en Social at the YMCA, 111 S. Main St., and a similar party at the YWCA. At Newberry Hall, the Student Christian Association sponsored a party. The committee prepared for 150 and more than 400 came. This group played cat's cradle, visited the ghost room, fished for their fortune, played games of skill, drew their partners' pictures, and had to tell a ghost story. Refreshments were given, and then the grand march home."
"The Senior High held a party at Miss Dow's home on Miller Avenue Road. Two hayracks paraded down State Street and down to the downtown district on their way to Miller Avenue. The group sang and yelled. At Main and Huron, a lively race between the two teams started out Main Street. The party ended at Miss Dow's home by burning the huge pile of hay from the two hayracks." (Does this not run a close parallel to what the Ann Arbor Junior Chamber of Commerce are planning for this Hallowe'en?)

The only note of malicious destruction I found was a story from Milan where several rods of fence were torn down, some sidewalks were torn up, two billboards were pulled down, and other property was destroyed. The article went on to say that the offenders had better be careful because of a $25 reward which had been offered for the apprehension of the guilty parties.

How much different is the story of today? I grant that the methods used in the so-called pranks are changed, but basically there is not too much difference. Organizations of today are still holding parties to keep the youth so busy having fun that they are not supposed to think up destructive pranks. In Ann Arbor, our JCC's are sponsoring a great party at the Car Port. Our schools are entertaining youth in their areas. We will have our Y parties, and private citizens will open their homes to the youth of their neighborhoods.

Even our so-called new idea of collecting clothing and money for our needy neighbors across the sea is not so novel. One of the articles in the paper in 1912 was about a club of boys, ranging in age from 12 to 14, who went to Mrs. Bodner, at that time Probation Officer and City Visitor. They obtained names of needy families and went out and collected food and clothing, which they delivered with a horse and wagon on Hallowe'en night. The article concluded by saying that the boys felt they had celebrated Hallowe'en in a novel and excellent fashion, and it was the jolliest Hallowe'en they had ever known.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
October 28, 1953

What did the youth of 50 years ago do on Halloween? Some of the following news items quoted from the News Files will tell you: "The Baptist Young People's Union held a party at their church house. They were entertained by ghosts. They read their fortunes and many ate apples on a mirror by the light of the moon."

"Miss Cornelia Nichols of Geddes Avenue, entertained a group of her friends in a most delightful way. The hall was decorated in corn-stalks, autumn leaves, and jack-o-lanterns. The guests were greeted by two ghosts in the hay barn and after an old-fashioned spelling bee, the ghosts led everyone out to a bonfire where they had a marshmallow roast and some dance. Later they returned to the barn where they danced the Virginia Reel, Honey Love, Hot Town, and the Will Irishman. Refreshments included apples, gingerbread and nuts."

"There was a Halloween Social at the YWCA, Lincoln St., and a similar party at the YMCA. At Newberry Hall, the Student Christian Association sponsored a party. The committee prepared for 150 and more than 300 came. Bobbing for apples proved popular, dated the great room, flashed the their fortune, played games of skill, drew their partners' pretzels and had to fall a smooth every Refresh-ments were given, and then the grand march on home."

"The Benton High Hallow Party was held in the home on Miller Avenue today. Two hayracks paraded down State Street and on to the down-town district on their way to Miller Avenue. The hayrides sang and yelled. At Main and Huron a lively race between the two teams started out Main Street. The party ended at Mark Jones's home by burn-ing the huge pile of hay from the two hayrides. Those this not run close parallel to Main the Ann Arbor Junior Chamber of Commerce are planning for this Halloween."

The only note of malicious destruction I found was a story from Milan where several rows of fence were torn down, some sidewalks were torn up, two billboards were pulled down, and other property was destroyed. The article went on to say that the offenders had better be careful because a $25 reward fund had been offered for the apprehension of the guilty parties.

How much different is the story of today? I grant that the methods used in the pursuit of pranks are changed, but basically there is not too much difference. Organized rallies or fronts are still holding parties to keep the youth so busy they have fun that they are not supposed to think or destructive pranks. In fact maybe, our 400's are spending a grand party at the Ann Arbor Inn. Our schools are entertaining youth in their areas. We will hear of our Y Hallow, and diverse citizens will open their homes to the youth of their neighborhoods.

Even our so-called new idea of collecting clothing and money for our needy neighbors across the seas is not so novel. One of the articles in the paper in 1912 was about a club of boys, ranging in age from 12 to 17, who used to make, boxes of their throughout Washington and City Hall. They obtained boxes of beans, tomatoes, and sent out and collected food and clothing, which they delivered with a horse and wagon on Saturdays and Sundays. The articles concluded by saying that the boys felt they had celebrated Halloween in a novel and exemplary fashion, and it was the jollicest Hallowe'en they had ever known.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
October 24, 1957